

# Vibrancy to Vacancy: Remaking the Deuce

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On 42d Street, near Seventh Avenue, Harry Kakoulides sits in his fast-food restaurant dreaming of Spartan kings and waiting for the sheriff.

"City, I don't have nothing to say, just 'Molon lave,' " said Mr. Kakoulides, quoting the taunt that King Leonidas of Sparta and his 300 guards shouted at the invading Persian Army in 480 B.C. "Come and take it."

King Leonidas lasted two days, and Mr. Kakoulides, a Greek immigrant who owns Bill's Deli on 42d Street, does not expect to hold out long. He has been ordered by the state to pull down his shutters and walk away forever from the store where he has served gyros, pastrami sandwiches and Jell-O for 15 years.

Once the sheriff evicts Mr. Kakoulides, his gleaming sign will be the last to go dark on the eastern end of the Deuce, the block of 42d Street braced by Times Square and Eighth Avenue. In a mere two years, city and state developers hoping to remake the block have turned this once-fevered, sleepless stretch of fast-food joints, porn shops, offices and theaters into a veritable ghost town in the heart of Manhattan. From Bustling to Vacant

"This area was so filled with people, I cannot walk in the streets," Mr. Kakoulides said with a nostalgic smile as he sat at one of his Formica tables under a bust of Alexander the Great. "A lot of traffic -- tourists, bums and good decent people."

Whether 42d Street was ever so delightful is the subject of some debate these days. And what it and all of Times Square will ultimately be is equally murky after developers announced last week that they were halting their plans to build the four giant office towers that required the eviction of Mr. Kakoulides and scores of other merchants and tenants.

But the present is clearer. Today, the Deuce offers only eerie reminders of its old bustle. The signs are still up for the Roxy Theaters and Pizza by Fiorentino ("The Pizza King"). Desks sit in empty office towers at Broadway, the chairs pushed back as though their occupants just wandered off to the water cooler. The grill still waits behind the windows of Tad's Steaks, and the menu above it still asks "Please order by numbers."

The people, though -- the tourists and voyeurs, shoppers and addicts, businessmen and pimps -- are mostly gone. And although the developers say that what will eventually replace the boarded-up storefronts will be a vast improvement over the past, critics say the project has carved the heart out of midtown and wiped out valuable tenants that provided low-cost entertainment to tourists and working-class New Yorkers.

State Senator Franz S. Leichter, a Manhattan Democrat, said that even at the strip's worst, 80 percent of the tenants were "perfectly legitimate."

The New York State Urban Development Corporation condemned about 34 buildings and moved out 236 tenants to pave the way for the project it abandoned last week. Over the next six months, the agency hopes to come up with a new plan to revive the area as a shopping, tourism and entertainment center. More Evictions, Faster

To do so, the agency will have to condemn the rest of the buildings and clear out the tenants remaining along 42d Street between Broadway and Eighth Avenue, said Rebecca Robertson, president of the 42d Street Development Project, a subsidiary of the Urban Development Corporation.

"If anything," Ms. Robertson said, "our present plan has accelerated our schedule." On Friday, the agency distributed a letter to remaining tenants that said its "need for possession" was "even more imminent" and urged them to move on schedule.

Significant renovation will not begin until at least the fall of 1993, Ms. Robertson said. In the meantime, she said the peace that prevails on 42d Street is an improvement over the seamy honky-tonk scene that preceded it. According to the Police Department, crime on the block dropped 54 percent between the beginning of 1989 and the end of 1991, as the crowds thinned out and more officers moved in. Much of the drug dealing and other crime is now concentrated by Eighth Avenue, where several pornographic video stores remain.

"I think that 42d Street is a street that means New York to a lot of people, but for many years what 42d Street has meant is six to seven crimes a day," Ms. Robertson said. "It's meant child prostitution. It sometimes seems to me the people who sentimentalize it are up in their houses in northern Connecticut."

Even many of the seemingly legitimate businesses, the developers say, served as stash houses for drug dealers or manufacturers of phony identification cards.

But the critics particularly lament the loss of several movie theaters that provided entertainment for thousands of people who did not come to the block to buy drugs or rent people. They flocked there for the first-run features that played at cut rates beside movies like "Night of the Creeps" and "Scent of Sex."

"I don't have the audience anymore," said Norman Adie, who has seen the screens he runs on the block dwindle from seven to two in the last two years. Because of all the empty buildings, he said, "a lot of people think we're no longer in existence."

In addition to Mr. Adie's two theaters, the Harris and the Selwyn, only one other remains open on the block. It shows pornographic films.

When the movie marquees began to go dark, Seymour Post started closing his improbable dive shop at 7:30 P.M. instead of 11:00. For 46 years, Mr. Post has sold swim suits, aqualungs and spear guns at 233 42d Street, and his counters are decorated with Polaroid shots of Jacques Cousteau and Prince Alexander of Yugoslavia buying his gear.

"They did a good job destroying the area," Mr. Post said of the developers. "They took the heart out." Let There Be Light

As he walked the strip last week, Mr. Post recalled how, alongside native New Yorkers, busloads of tourists used to wander the broad sidewalks after the Times Square theaters emptied out. These days, only the few signs remaining at the western end of the block help the six streetlamps illuminate the Deuce at night. "Now everybody runs," he said.

Rather than spending hundreds of million of dollars, Mr. Post said, the key to reviving the block is simply to switch the bright signs back on. "Light up the street," he said. "The people will come."

While they criticize other aspects of the project, many local merchants are delighted with the increased police presence. "They really cleaned up the block," said one of the owners of Peepland, where naked women dance in the basement. He spoke on condition of anonymity because, he said, his business still bears a stigma.

Peepland, across the street from Mr. Post's store, is one of the brighter spots remaining on the block, with a sign made of yellow light bulbs arranged like a keyhole, through which a neon pupil flashes red. Inside, dim lights flicker, and muffled, recorded cries emanate from the occupied video booths on the first floor. But, despite all the men in suits who walked swiftly through on two evenings this week, business, the owner said, is hurting.

While he agreed that 42d Street needed sprucing up, the owner argued for a simpler approach: planting trees and shrubs along the sidewalk, and painting all the storefronts the same colors. He protested when asked if the old 42d Street was as sleazy as some remember it.

"Let's use other adjectives," he said, pausing in the middle of emptying hundreds of golden tokens from one video booth. "Exciting, mystifying, adrenaline-causing, razz-a-ma-tazzy, spiffy." He caught himself.

"No," he said. "Forget spiffy."